

A Conflicted Era

by Dyranum

Category: Halo, Mass Effect

Genre: Sci-Fi

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2012-02-22 23:18:25

Updated: 2012-06-19 16:30:48

Packaged: 2016-04-27 02:39:31

Rating: M

Chapters: 4

Words: 9,314

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: The galaxy is ablaze as the Second Stellar War rages. However, there are far more terrifying and ancient threats lurking just over the edge. Sequel to A Shattered Era.

1. Prologue

Author's Notes: _This is a sequel to the story "A Shattered Era", I suggest you read that one before continuing with this one due to spoilers of important events, no matter the better quality of the sequel in comparison to the original._

Also, I should note that you shouldn't expect all that frequent and regular updates as I have both RL stuff and another active story which requires much more effort than this one.

Includes spoilers for recent media about the involved fictional universes.

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WARNING: Can contain traces of cursing and added alliterative appeal.

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><p>Prologue

7th July 2700

The Second Stellar War had been going on for more than a year now, but no decisive results had been achieved for either side. While the UEG Outer Colonies were quickly falling to mainly Terran and Union forces, the UNSC had made great gains against the USSR and

Sava-Thrace. However, the Austrians were advancing into the UEG Inner Colonies and the Balkan-Haemus, the main area of conflict being the border regions with Prusa and the Balkan Confederacy being most committed to fighting their neighbour. Prusa had already fallen, being that it was a rather small state with an appropriately small army, and though the Balkan Confederacy was still standing that was solely due to the fact that the Terran Empire and Austria were focusing more on the UEG.

Some had actually been surprised by the quick advance made by the Terrans in the Outer Colonies, but the man sitting in a sparsely decorated office on Reach was not. He knew that the Outer Colonies were relatively sparsely defended in comparison to the more developed Inner Colonies. To him, it had not been surprising at all that the UEG territory in the Balkan-Haemus had been lost early on. Neither was the very bad fortune of Piscina and Pañ-s, being as they are wedged between Tweed, Dosguays and the power of the Balkan-Haemus: Sava-Thrace.

Despite there being no immediate threat to Reach, Kristján Muninn was quite stressed. He had had a lot of work piled onto him, and was slightly worried how the war might end up when all forces had been fully mobilised. As is, the real battle had not started yet. The only states that were fully committed at this moment were the small states in the Balkan-Haemus, but the others were slowly getting there as well and it would probably not be long before the UNSC would be able to fully take control of the military from the UEG.

Muninn tapped away at his computer, going through documents and reports. His office was rather typically military, with only the bare necessities present. Among these were a metallic desk, a computer and two rather straight and uncomfortable metallic chairs. One being behind the desk and occupied by Muninn while the other was on the opposite side with its back towards the door and empty. There was no actual windows to filter sunlight into the office either, the gray walls instead being either blank or lined with various equipment and storage room for data pads.

Muninn stopped his working at the computer, without any real warning, and started fiddling with it a bit to disable whatever audio or video detection might exist inside his office. He put them all on a continuous loop of old footage so as to not make ONI suspicious. After doing so, he leaned back onto his chair and brought a hand up to his right ear to press a button on a device mounted on top of said ear. "This is Operative Raven Two to HMS Odin, over", Muninn said to no one in particular, or at least that's what an outside observer would have interpreted it as. He waited for a bit before the voice of a woman came through from the other end.

The voice had a rather strange mix of casualness and seriousness, being friendly but carrying an undertone of somber determination. "This is the Odin, go ahead", said the voice.

"I request assistance, the situation is becoming untenable and I suspect that ONI is hot on my heels", said Muninn.

There was a pause before the voice answered. "I am sorry Raven Two, but Huginn is unavailable at this moment. He has been reassigned to the Simulacrum Project. I suggest you move to one of our hidden outposts in the Outer Colonies for extraction".

"I understand, though my odds are not excellent. Are there some other Operatives who could help my chances?".

"Just wait a minute, I will have to check that", said the voice. There was a rather long pause before it returned, and Muninn hoped that nobody would catch him in this position. The risk was there and a very real one, he had barely avoided detection at one incident. Unfortunately, that had been an ONI agent, and was probably what put him as a suspicious person to ONI.

After some time, the voice returned. "We have a few Agents who could help you", it said. "We can arrange your move to Tribute. From there, it will not be too hard to get you to one of our outposts". Muninn let out a breath which he hadn't known he was holding. Even if he would receive no direct assistance, he now at least had a possible way out.

"Wilco Odin, I'm out", said Muninn and then cut the link. Just in time too as a chime sounded from the door not long thereafter. Muninn re-activated all audio and video surveillance before admitting entry to the person on the other side of the door. The door flew open by itself, allowing a male person clad in a black ONI uniform (which looked like it was a trench coat) to enter. Muninn offered the man the seat in front of him. The ONI agent sat down on the seat, but kept a straight back.

"So, what can I do for you?", said Muninn, putting on a friendly tone despite how much he despised ONI. The fact that he couldn't see the eyes of the man "hidden as they were behind what appeared to be a pair of black sunglasses, but which Muninn knew were a sort of computer interface" did not help either.

When the ONI man spoke, he had a raspy tenor voice. "Well, there are a lot of things which you could do, but none of them are relevant as to why I am here", he said.

"Then why are you here?", said Muninn. He had quite a few suspicious as to the why of this sudden visit, the most pressing and "in his opinion" most likely being the fact that ONI had discovered him.

"Before I say anything more, I would first like to know if this room is secure enough to share sensitive information".

"It is secure", said Muninn.

"Good", said the ONI agent. The man sighed, and lowered his hand to one of the pockets on his trench coat and pulled out a data pad, which he handed over to Muninn. Muninn picked it up and gave the man a questioning glance, to which the man simply nodded.

Muninn read through it quickly, despite the fact that he cast several suspicious glances at the ONI man. The trench coat clad man did not do anything, and simply sat there in silence. After Muninn had finished reading through the pad, he was quite shocked. The fact that ONI had been tracking him for so long and recorded such a plethora of incidents was most unsettling. Outwards, Muninn stayed calm, slowly laying the pad down onto the desk.

"So, if you knew all of this already, then why have you decided to even meet me?", said Muninn, whilst covertly disabling the audio and video surveillance in the room and set them on a loop through the use of a quick mind command which he had set up in just an eventuality such as this one. It had been horribly expensive and probably raised a lot of suspicion, but right now it definitely felt like it was worth it.

"Because of an interesting conversation which we picked up quite recently. Could you please enlighten me as to what this 'Simulacrum Project' is?". The man had a small but noticeable smug smile on his face.

"Well, then I hate to disappoint you, because I have little knowledge of what Project Simulacrum is". In contrast to his counterpart, Muninn's features did not change a bit. He unclapsed his hands and let his arms fall to his sides.

"Tell me what you know", said the man.

"It is of a high priority, though far from the highest", said Muninn as he slowly brought his right arm closer and closer to one of the pockets on his trousers.

"I do not think that is all you know".

Muninn nodded, whilst slowly lowering his right hand into a pocket which he always used for storing a weapon. "Indeed. I also know that a spaceship called 'Serenity' is to play an important role for the Project".

"Important as in a base of operations?"

"I do not know, but that would be my assumption". Muninn clasped his hand around the hard sound pistol in his pocket. The comforting feeling of the cold metal of the weapon spread across his palm and fingers.

"What is it for sort of ship?", said the ONI agent.

"Again, I do not know. It is classified information which I am not privy to". He slowly brought his hand up from his pocket with the pistol in hand.

"Could you give me a brief description of the Project", asked the ONI agent. Muninn noticed that the man also had his hands by his sides and that they were moving. Very slightly, but still a noticeable amount.

"Well, from what I am aware of, it aims to create some sort of new and revolutionary weapon. The name is probably a good indicator of the Project's purpose", said Muninn, as he let his right arm hang to his side, in the position as it was before he brought up the pistol now firmly in his right hand from his pocket.

"Really?", said the agent, not sounding very impressed. Muninn did not care if the man believed his lies or not, as he aimed the hard sound pistol at the man from under the table. He aimed it at the man's right hand, which Muninn believed was occupied with furtively bringing up a pistol.

"Indeed", said Muninn. The ONI agent was about to say something when he pulled down the trigger. The man grunted as his hand was hit by pulverising hard sound and dropped a pistol. It clattered down to the floor as Muninn pulled his right arm and hand up from beneath the desk. He aimed at the ONI agent's head and fired off. The sonic projectile from the weapon hit home and caused instant death.

The trench coat clad man fell limply down to the floor, without any evidence of a violent ending at all as was the typical effect when killed by hard sound. Muninn slid the pistol back into his pocket and set about exchanging clothes with the deceased ONI operative. Hopefully, that and a slight modification of his face to resemble the man now lying dead at his feet would be enough to allow him to get away.

After having dressed himself up in the black trench coat of the ONI operative and giving the dead agent his more formal wear as well as applied a face mask, Muninn hoped that he could sneak out. He had checked anything of worth which the deceased man had, and found his mission log, which was rather convenient to him. Apparently, the agent was supposed to question him, execute him, send a quick signal that he had done his job, and then move away from the immediate location and to his next assignment which was off-world.

Muninn decided to follow the agent's mission but before he sent a signal back to ONI, he applied a face altering mask to the dead man and altered it to resemble himself. He put the dead body in his chair and in a position which made it look like he had been killed. Muninn picked up the agent's pistol, lying on the ground. It was a hard sound pistol, standard ONI assassin's tool. He placed it in the hand of the dead agent who was now nearly indistinguishable from Muninn himself.

Only then, after all these preparations were done, did Muninn send the signal to ONI. He paused slightly in front of the door, giving his office a last glance before walking up to it and then through it as it automatically slid open for him.

2. Chapter 1

****Includes spoilers for recent media about the involved fictional universes.****

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><p>Chapter 1

****29th July 2700****

The bridge of the OSA Reach was bustling with activity as usual. Despite the fact that human space had descended into all-out war, there had still been enough volunteers to fill any gaps created from the fight against the geth. Although it had all been just a mopping-up exercise after the battle of the Citadel, the fact remained that the geth were still dangerous no matter how weak.

A more pressing concern than the crew however, was the status of the Reach and the Orion Systems Alliance as a whole. The OSA had pretty much collapsed by now, but the Reach was still officially an OSA ship. This allowed great flexibility for Shepard and her crew in manoeuvring around the galaxy, but they still mostly stayed away from where the fighting was conducted between the warring human states.

What human space that the Reach regularly entered was mostly the Outer Skyllian Verge, mostly to resupply and lend the occasional help against the various menaces of the Terminus which used the distraction of the Second Stellar War to attack the Austrian borderland. At one point, Shepard and her crew had been responsible for stopping attempts by Batarian extremists to crash a large asteroid into one of the more densely populated planets of the Skyllian Verge.

Despite the situation not looking all that bad for them, Shepard actually somewhat missed her old ground team. The only one left was York, the others had been either reassigned " as in the case of Garrus and Wyoming " or left to go back to their respective species, which was the case with Wrex and Tali. Shepard had actually wondered why the UNSC had not reassigned York, as he would probably be needed in their war.

She regretted looking a gift horse into the mouth when she fourteen days ago had received word that York was to be reassigned as well, which meant that she had none of her old team still left on the Reach. However, despite the fact that she lacked these experienced soldiers, many of the volunteers who had signed up hadn't been sloppy either. Most impressive had been two individuals, one a scarred man called Piet de Walle, who favoured medium- to long-ranged combat but was also very competent at short-range. However, his speciality was infiltration and operating by himself, something which had gotten them out of a few sticky situations, and the hacking skills that came with such a specialisation as his also came in handy. The other was a much younger man by the name of Jacob Taylor. Taylor was a skilled biotic and medium-ranged combatant, and did not really stand out that much, being just a regular guy who wanted to do something good in the world. At least not in relation to de Walle, who - despite being a good soldier " Shepard found rather suspicious in a few ways that were hard to describe. He simply struck her as not the most trustworthy person.

At the present, they were heading for a planet located beyond the borders of Austria called "Freedom's Progress". Intel from Austria had alerted Shepard to the fact that there had been sightings of the Reach's old nemesis " a ship with the appearance of a termite mound mounted onto a large rocket, commanded by the mysterious Collectors " around the planet.

Austrian intelligence had also recently informed Shepard that there had been a total communications blackout from Freedom's Progress on

the 28th. They wanted the Reach to investigate as they did not have forces to spare, being all either tied up in the War or guarding the borders with the Terminus or the Confederacy.

Shepard didn't complain at this new turn of events. The Collectors had been involved with Saren somehow, and she was eager to decipher the reason as to why. She moved away from the galaxy map and walked up behind Joker and Kaidan.

"Nice of you to join us, Commander", said Joker, not removing his gaze from the consoles in front of him. "We'll be arriving at Freedom's Progress in just a few hours".

"Order the whole team to assemble and down in the hangar in 30 minutes", said Shepard.

Joker nodded, and tapped some keys on the console. "Alrighty Commander, though I don't see why I have to do it. I mean, they're only four guys."

Shepard sighed. It was a depressing fact that despite the volunteers that had signed up to join the crew of the Reach, the ground team was still horribly understaffed. Taylor, de Walle, Schneider, and Oststein; all of them capable soldiers, but they were still just four soldiers. She turned and walked away from the cockpit to suit up. After having put on her combat gear, she took the lift down to the hangar.

The door to the elevator slid open to reveal the cavernous chamber - with the various dropships and other assorted vehicles, as well as a great deal of large boxes and crates spread out over its floor as usual - which was unusually empty. Or, rather, Shepard would have considered it unusually empty if she had not known the reasons behind that. As it was, the hangar crew had shrunk dramatically. The four soldiers of the ground team were all already seated in a dropship, located on the other side of the elevator. Shepard crossed the distance without too much hurry, glancing around the hangar bay as she did so. She spotted a gathering of hangar bay personnel by a mass of boxes, standing or sitting, conversing on some unessential topic. Having covered the distance between the lift and the dropship, Shepard could probably make out her ground team. Taylor with his assault rifle, de Walle with his sniper rifle, Schneider with her plasma rifle, and Oststein with his trademark shotgun.

Taylor gave Shepard a friendly nod as she got onto the dropship, the bay doors of the dropship closing behind her. A voice sounded over the dropship's intercom.

"This is Clarence Oveur, thanking you for choosing to fly with Air Clarence", the voice said as Shepard strapped herself in on a seat beside Taylor. "There is likely to be some air turbulence on this flight, but nothing too serious. I wish you all a safe flight". This was followed by a feeling of free fall as the dropship was dropped from the Reach, and proceeded down to Freedom's Progress.

"Is he always like that?", said Schneider, the newest recruit to the ground team.

"Yeah", said Taylor. "It gets better if he has to answer somebody"

A confused expression was Schneider's response, though she did not follow it up with any more questions as the pilot of the dropship spoke up again.

"We're on approach to the co-ordinates. Looks like some heavy fighting is going on", said Oveur over the intercom.

"Wait", said Shepard. "How can there be any resistance? The modus operandi of the Collectors does not allow for that".

"Austrian troops, maybe?", said Schneider. "I've heard rumours that at least the elite has counter-measures against the Collectors".

"But that begs the question", said Oststein, his little-utilised voice with its bass catching the others off-guard. "Why would Austria suddenly decide that Freedom's Progress is worth wasting elite troops on?"

That's true, thought Shepard, _it is odd._

* * *

><p>The Illusive Man sat in his chair as usual, with a cigarette in hand, reading the latest reports from Operative Huginn, concerning Project Simulacrum. It was progressing according to schedule. All of the pieces necessary had been put into place for phase two to commence. While the Illusive Man was of the opinion that it was unnecessarily byzantine in its way to go about things, the potential gains were all worth the relatively little resources expended.<p>

The vast, empty room, with its vista of the stars, was a relaxing sight, but the turbulent nature of the closest star was not. One could see it as a representative of the state of the galaxy. Human space was at war with itself, and the Citadel had found a Halo. The latter had only come to the attention of the Illusive Man relatively recently. He had informed his compatriots of it as soon as was possible, but any Terran action to prevent the Citadel from seizing control of the ring-like megastructure would in all likelihood simply be a waste of resources at this time. Still, that did not prevent him from putting a team in action with the stated objective of recovering information from the ring and then destroying it.

One could indeed see it as a waste to destroy such a useful thing as a Halo, but the Illusive Man was of the opinion that better the ring be destroyed than the Citadel be allowed to lay their hands on it. Despite the Illusive Man's conviction of the necessity of denying a Halo to the Citadel, he had been overruled by his colleagues, something he found frustrating to no end. Still, he was capable of witnessing the reality of the current situation. Terran resources were tied up in the Second Stellar War, Project Simulacrum, as well as other assorted Projects.

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><p>Author's Notes: _I apologise for my absence, but I have had a lot on my plate. Also, as I am returning from a long hiatus, I might very well make mistakes here in regards to A Shattered Era. If you spot any such incoinsistencies, please notify

me._

My writing skills are probably a bit rusty as well. Critique is welcome, as always.

3. Chapter 2

****Author's Notes: ****_Right, uncharacteristically quick update, eh? Anyways, I am unsure of what to rate this story as. Therefore, I ask you, the reader, what this story would be rated as after this chapter._

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><p>Chapter 2

****29th July 2700****

The dropship shook as it entered the atmosphere of Freedom's Progress. Breaking through, now flying over the surface of the planet, it approached the drop-point with speed. The settlement that the dropship was flying over was almost totally devoid of life, and the pre-fab structures had taken damage. Gunfire could be seen in the distance at a sort of plaza. This plaza was home to the government sector of Freedom's Progress, with its grand stone buildings, wholly different from the pre-fab structures surrounding them.

The dropship touched down at a square, devoid of life in all directions, though with evidence of fighting. The first one to exit the dropship was Oststein, followed shortly thereafter by Taylor and Schneider. Shepard hefted her plasma rifle and jumped out of the dropship bay, with de Walle landing beside her. She glanced around the square. There were pre-fabs all over, but also some actual structures, as well as roads which lead to various parts of the city.

"All clear", said Taylor. "We should hurry to the government sector".

"I agree", said Shepard. "Let's move out".

They did so, setting off down the road leading directly to the plaza in the distance, passing by pre-fab after pre-fab. Some of the buildings were in excellent condition, while others were obviously damaged, though whether it was from pirates or the Collectors was impossible to discern. The whole place was a ghost town, not a soul in sight. The suspiciousness of the situation did not serve to alleviate Shepard's fears that they were walking straight into a

trap.

As they came closer to the government sector, the sound of gunfire became louder and louder. Finally reaching the plaza, Shepard saw Austrian troops holed up by the various government buildings, all firing at insect-like humanoids. At that moment, there was no doubt in her mind. These were indeed Collectors. However, she did note that none of the swarm of insect-like drones that had been reported to accompany a Collector presence were present.

The Austrian troops were mainly located at the part of the road that they were at, in addition to the primary government structure, with its Greek columns holding up a great roof in front of the entrance. On top of this roof were Austrian snipers, utilising the height advantage it gave them. The Collector forces were mainly pressing against this structure, only sending forces to the other location in order to pin down the Austrians.

Shepard made a quick decision. "de Walle, Schneider, you help the Austrians on the road. Taylor, Oststein, you're with me. We'll get the government building".

Her squad gave her a row of affirmatives, and then they were off to their assigned objectives. An Austrian trooper saw them when he turned around, and signalled his fellow soldiers that Shepard's team were friendlies. Shepard gave him a nod, before setting off for the government building, though she still overheard Schneider saying that the Austrians should give Shepard covering fire.

Shepard sprinted over the destroyed plaza, using destroyed vehicles as cover when her shields were breached by Collector fire. Still, she and her small team were able to arrive at the government building without too much problem. Walking up the stone steps to the main entrance of the structure, she searched for some sort of commander over the troops. An Austrian soldier was ducking down behind a waist-height stone wall which lined the large stone plateau that was the main entrance to the government structure.

Shepard turned to him. "Who's in charge here?", she said, shouting over the sound of gunfire.

The Austrian trooper did not have the time to answer her as another figure to the left shouted, "I am".

Shepard turned to the source of this announcement, and was met by the sight of an Austrian Captain with a heavy limp. He held out a hand, which Shepard shook. "Damn glad to have some reinforcements", said the Captain. "Those Collectors are hammering us into dust".

Shepard nodded, "What's the situation?"

"Collectors have the city", said the Captain. "We were doing our guard duty as usual when that giant termite mound appeared in the sky and began dropping troops"

"What about Seekers?", said Shepard. "If this is a Collector attack, there should've been Seekers".

"Yeah, and there used to be a lot here, but we've been equipped with the counter-measures. Brass wanted to be prepared for anything that

might try and attack the border worlds. They took most of the city before we were able to bring out the bug-spray though". A sullen expression descended upon the Austrian Captain as he said he said that last sentence, but he recovered quickly enough, instead adopting a determined attitude. "We'll push back those Collectors. Get over there at the other set of steps, that's where you'll be most needed".

Shepard nodded, then turned to her squad, which was actually only made up of Oststein and Taylor, so it was not much in the way of a squad in her own opinion. "Alright, you heard him".

They made their way over the stone plateau to the other set of steps, exactly opposite the ones that they had used to get up onto the platform. Austrian troops were at all of the edges of the plateau, utilising the waist-high stone walls as cover, and forming a sort of wall that prevented any Collector from advancing onto the main entrance of the government building at the back.

Coming up at the steps, Shepard raised her plasma rifle and let loose a burst at a Collector who chose that moment to stand up from behind a trashed car. The plasma took out the shields of the bug-like humanoid who then received a bullet to the head, courtesy of Taylor.

A bright light shone from the Collector position, and Shepard rolled to her left without thinking, the rocket barely missing her. Standing up, she was then exposed when the Austrian troops in front of her ducked down behind the stone walls. Shepard was forced to duck as a yellow-green beam of light streamed from the weapon of a Collector, acting very similarly to a Sentinel Beam. It swept over the stone walls, cutting down two Austrian troopers who were too slow to duck down to avoid it.

However, this allowed Shepard to take cover to the right of the set of steps that they were defending, roughly pushing away the corpses. Taylor ducked down beside her. "Commander, we won't be able to hold this position indefinitely, the Collectors outnumber us", he said.

Shepard was about to respond when an Austrian trooper ducked down behind the wall to Taylor's right said, "Don't worry. Reinforcements are on their way".

Wait what? Then why did they notify us?, thought Shepard with a frown. She decided to save that question for when they were not fighting for their lives, though any train of thought would have been derailed anyways by a booming voice coming from the Collector position which suddenly made its presence known.

"ASSUMING DIRECT CONTROL", it announced.

Shepard stood up with plasma rifle in hand to see a Collector floating up in the air and glowing yellow, with some sort of energy coursing through it. Not knowing what it was doing, but unwilling to take any chances, she fired her rifle at it. The plasma rounds had seemingly little effect as the Collector landed on the ground, easily discernable from the environment as well as the other Collectors due to the fact that its skin was cracked and glowing with energy.

A ball of white light formed in the hands of the strange Collector, who then made a throwing motion, launching the light ball at an Austrian trooper to the left of the steps. The trooper reacted by ducking down beneath the stone wall, but the white ball of light impacted in the stone wall, leaving behind a rather large burn mark and releasing a shockwave which pushed away the three troopers ducking down. They stood up, obviously dazed, and were cut down by Collector fire as Shepard continued firing her plasma rifle.

When it overheated, she ducked down behind the stone wall, and that same booming voice with its steel-like quality spoke again. "YOUR DEATH IS ASSURED", it said, sending chills down Shepard's spine. They were definitely in a bad situation. Although her whole squad was alive, with Oststein staking the place of the dead Austrian troopers on the left side of the steps, and Taylor right beside her, the Austrian troops had taken a beating.

Shepard fired out from the side of the wall, cutting down another Collector. That victory was short-lived as another white ball was launched by what she assumed was some sort of Collector leader at the Austrian trooper right beside Taylor.

"FACE YOUR ANNIHILATION", said the booming voice of the Collector as its projectile caught the Austrian trooper in the torso, flinging him backwards, his limp body landing about one metre away.

"Could somebody shut that bastard up?", shouted one of the remaining Austrian troopers.

Shepard nodded at him, "Agreed. Taylor, Oststein, ready?" Both of her squad-mates nodded at her.

As one, they stood up and opened fire on the Collector, who responded by launching a Warp at Oststein, who easily avoided it.

"YOU CANNOT STOP US, SHEPARD", it said as its shields were destroyed.

Shepard was unfazed by the fact that the Collector knew who she was, and continued firing, cutting down the thick plating, and causing visible damage on the Collector

"THIS CHANGES NOTHING, SHEPARD. THIS SHELL IS ONLY A VEHICLE", said the Collector as it took one final burst from Shepard and proceeded to disintegrate into ashes.

They immediately ducked down shortly thereafter, all of them noticing how dangerously low their shields had gone. In fact, Oststein's shields had totally collapsed and he had taken heavy damage to his armour. Still, they had taken out the most dangerous in the Collector force.

Shepard saw Taylor glow with biotic energy and then standing up. Shepard looked out from the side of the wall to see a Collector being pulled upwards, wrapped in a biotic field. That Collector did not live long after that, as plasma fire from both Shepard and the two remaining Austrian trooper on their end reached it.

Shepard turned her aim at another Collector who, to her great dismay and horror, was lifted up into the air and drenched in yellow and red

energy, its skin cracking open and acquiring a magma-like texture, and accompanied by that same voice. "ASSUMING CONTROL OF THIS FORM".

Shepard fired her plasma rifle on full auto, ducking down once it overheated. She swore. However, she did not have long to contemplate what to do when she saw Oststein standing up and throwing three grenades at the Collector position. "Eat this!", he shouted. The grenades landed among the Collectors, taking down a few of them, but most importantly, they destroyed the barriers of the glowing Collector.

Shepard stood up and fired at the now weakened Collector who, to her horror, launched another one of those energy balls straight at Oststein. Oststein ducked under it, but suffered an energy beam straight to his face. He emitted a short scream, which was then cut off as the searing beam killed him.

Shepard continued firing at the glowing Collector, but was unable to take it out before her own shields were cut down. The Collector looked like it was ready to launch another biotic attack when a sniper shot rang out from the other end of the plaza, going clean through the skull of the Collector which then proceeded to disintegrate.

Shepard ducked down, allowing her shields to recharge. Their position was still bad though as Taylor alerted her of Collector reinforcements coming in from the roads leading to the Collector-occupied part of the plaza.

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><p>De Walle allowed himself to smile at the flawless shot he pulled off that neutralised the Collector leader that had been causing trouble for Shepard. Of course, he was fully aware that it would probably return, but that did not diminish his sniping skills. Their part of the plaza had been hit hard as well, though the Collector forces were now down to about four soldiers, facing off against a squad of Austrian troops and himself. Schneider had been killed during the fighting, though it was de Walle who had allowed that to happen by not taking out the Collector sniper which had sighted her.<p>

It was just as well according to him though, as it meant that there would be less fuzz and unwanted observers. The "Austrian" troops were all trustworthy, but Schneider would have been a problem. Watching the fighting going on at the government structure, de Walle allowed himself to smile again as he typed in a few commands on his arm-mounted computer.

"Initiating Delta in 7", said de Walle over the encrypted channel that he and Taylor used. He had to give some sort of warning to Jacob, after all. However, it was also linked to the "Austrian" troopers in the vicinity of the government structure as well.

Watching the fighting over at Shepard's position, de Walle started to count down.

Shepard was standing up, returning fire to the multiple squads of Collectors in front of her.

5,

Another Collector began glowing with energy, its skin cracking open.

Austrian snipers on top of the stone roof above the stone plateau, held up as it was by columns, stood up and retreated into the government building through a wide set of doors.

4,

"ASSUMING CONTROL", that persistent booming voice announced.

Shepard turned her attention to the more dangerous Collector, firing off accurate bursts with her plasma rifle. However, what she did not notice was how many of those around her were retreating away from the plateau.

3,

Taylor moved past Shepard and ducked down to the left of the steps.

2,

Shepard ducked down as her shields were depleted.

1,

Taylor rolled to the left, next to the main entrance, and away from the plateau with its columns and roof.

0,

De Walle pressed a button on his console, and the columns holding up the stone roof started to slowly crumble along with the roof. De Walle knew that the crumbling pieces of the structure did not have the necessary kinetic energy to actually kill anybody standing directly under the roof with adequate armour, but he also knew that they could still cause severe damage. However, most of the lethal damage would be to those standing around the plateau

He saw Shepard look up in shock as the roof collapsed down onto her.

* * *

><p>Location: Classified ONI headquarters

"Hmm, this took some time. Wait, got it!", said a man in triumph. He was dressed in heavy armour, coloured tan but with splotches of white paint as well. He was standing in an office, the only human present there. There had been a corpse of another ONI agent there, disguised to look like the actual occupier of the office.

"What can you find, D?", said the man to no one in particular.

Without warning, the avatar of a green figure was projected from the armour of the man.

"Not much of use", said the green avatar. "Though there are some interesting documents and search patterns here. Many of them relates to former Austrian commando, Commander Shepard".

"Wait, you mean that Shepard?", said the man.

"Yes, York", said the avatar. "I do".

* * *

><p>Author's Note: Tell me what you think of it. I feel as if I made a few blunders and mistakes somewhere in that combat section.

And again, I would really appreciate it if you could tell me what you think the rating should be.

4. Chapter 3

****Includes spoilers for recent media about the involved fictional universes.****

****Disclaimer: I don't own Halo, Mass Effect or Red vs Blue, or any of the other universes that are represented and/or referenced. Those all belong to their respective owners, the only things that are mine are the OCs.****

****WARNING: Can contain traces of cursing and added alliterative appeal.****

* * *

><p>Chapter 3

****28th July 2700****

****Aluxia Prime, Union of Sovereign Systems and Regions****

Burgundy was not having a good day. He had been put in charge of a few squads of elite snipers with the objective of turning a vital chokepoint of the capital of Aluxia Prime into a killing ground. The Aluxia system was a vital frontier system which repaired and resupplied Union warships. Losing Aluxia would allow the forces of the UNSC to push further into the territory of the USSR. Losing the capital would in essence mean losing Aluxia Prime, and the rest of the system would surely follow soon thereafter. The problem with all of this was that Burgundy was not a front-line combatant, he was an infiltrator and an assassin. Commanding large troop formations was definitely not in his job-description either. He was more experienced in leading small teams. Still, a mission was a mission regardless.

Burgundy looked out over the plaza from his vantage point, lying down on top of a building roof. The plaza used to be tidy and quite an impressive view, with its grand fountain, white statues, and the unique architecture of those vital structures located in it. Now

though, it was filled with craters, holes, casings, car wrecks, and other less pleasant things. There were three roads leading to and from the plaza, one right in front of Burgundy and the others to his left and right. It was quite excellent for sniping, and the fact that UNSC forces would have to pass through and/or take this location ensured that there would be plenty of targets. They had already caused quite a lot of trouble for the UNSC, but what really was the source of Burgundy's bad day was the fact that they now were one of few Union pockets still left in the city. The UNSC had been absolutely relentless, and now all the force of elite snipers could do was to fall back. Unfortunately, falling back would mean giving up the vital structures in the plaza to the UNSC.

Therefore, Burgundy had made the decision to erase every piece of important information inside the structures, in addition to demolishing them. For that purpose, he had sent in a few of his men with the explicit order to erase information on the computers and then planting explosives. What he and the rest were currently doing, still holed up in the plaza despite the horrible situation, was merely a delaying action.

Surveying the structures flanking the plaza and the roads leading to it with thermal sensors, Burgundy spotted what was in all probability a UNSC soldier hiding in one structure. He took aim with a heavy sniper rifle that he had recovered from a fallen UNSC trooper due to the fact that his particle accelerator had been destroyed during the fighting, absorbing bolts from a UNSC laser rifle that would have otherwise caused quite a bit of damage to his armour. Still, the rifle now in his hands was a capable weapon, even if it did use kinetic energy to inflict damage.

The UNSC soldier stood up, and Burgundy pulled down the trigger on the sniper rifle. The anti-vehicular projectile of the sniper rifle flew out from the rifle accompanied with a loud sound, and struck the UNSC soldier, causing instant death. Nothing moved in response either, it was all deathly quiet.

It had been quiet for some time now, though Burgundy had no delusions that it would last. The UNSC were just waiting for the moment to strike, that he was sure of, and nobody telling him to stop being paranoid would make him change his mind. And even if the UNSC had decided to not waste more soldiers trying to take the plaza, most of the city was under UNSC occupation, and they would surely have to fight through UNSC forces if they were to get out of the city. There were still a few designated safe-zones where one could get a ride off of Aluxia. The closest and safest one was out in the middle of nowhere, and that was where Burgundy planned to lead his team. The only problem was, of course, the UNSC forces.

Suddenly, his radio came online. "Sir, objective accomplished. Awaiting orders", said a voice.

"Got it", said Burgundy, and then switched to the channel used by his whole team. "Alright, bomb has been planted. Let's get out of this place, shall we?" He received a row of affirmatives. "We'll split up into smaller units. Evade UNSC forces as much as possible and get to the LZ. Alpha squad, you're with me". He waited for confirmation from his troops before standing up and holstering his sniper rifle.

He signalled those snipers with him that made up Alpha squad that

they were leaving as he walked towards the door which granted access to the roof. They ran down the steps, corridors and chambers of the building, heading for the back entrance to the structure that they knew was there from surveying the schematics. Arriving down in the entrance hall, there was not a sign that the place could at any time be thrown into the air at the push of a button. They quickly made their way through the large chamber that was the entrance, heading down some more corridors, before emerging out on the back of the structure through what was in actuality an emergency exit.

Knowing that the UNSC would be patrolling the streets, Burgundy headed for the first structure he spotted that could be used as a starting point for jumping from roof to roof. The government building that they had been on had been placed specifically to avoid such possibilities, therefore necessitating this course of action. They got up to the roof of the structure without incident, and could then proceed to jump over to the nearby roofs as the buildings of the capital of Aluxia were all placed rather tightly together to save space.

Being up on the roofs of the structures made it easy to spot the devastation wrought on the city by the urban combat and UNSC precision strikes by aircraft or starship. The majestic spire which dominated the landscape of the city was practically gone, the only thing left being a smoking ruin. The financial district was in utter ruin, with pillars of dark gray smoke still rising up from it. The pristine and clean surfaces of most structures within viewing range were all ruined, replaced instead by scorch marks, bullet holes, and whatever else the UNSC was using. A few buildings even had large gaping holes in them.

It reminded Burgundy of what could happen to his own home, and of the lifeless bodies of his comrades that were lost during the initial battles. To him, it seemed as if the UNSC was bent on destroying everything he held dear, a ruthless force that only brought destruction. Every single one of the men under his command were fighting for their homes, and so was he.

Still, no amount of stubbornness or determination was going to win a fight on its own. The fact is that the USSR was in a horrible position. Despite precautions taken against such things, the UNSC had still been able to disable large portions of the automated portion of the Union forces when encountered. The automated forces made up over half of the total size of the USSR's military. Needless to say, the sudden discovery that the UNSC had the capabilities of nullifying automatons had been unpleasant to the utmost degree.

Burgundy looked down towards the streets as he jumped from rooftop to rooftop. UNSC forces could be seen patrolling the city from time to time, though their presence in this part of the capital was surprisingly light. He only spotted a few armoured columns driving along, though often in large roads and wide open spaces, as they would be horribly exposed to infantry assault in tight spaces.

Landing with a roll after a particularly large jump, Burgundy came to a stop as he surveyed his surroundings. They were at the edge of the city, but there were no longer any rooftops close enough, forcing them to go down to the ground level. Hacking open the door on the roof, Burgundy took point and advanced down the staircase with his

squad following after, quietly. UNSC presence was heavier in this district than previous ones, and they had to be on their guard. Alerting UNSC forces would not be good at all.

"Spread out; take separate ways down", said Burgundy over the squad intercom. "I'll mark a rendezvous point if we have the time". With that order, the squad dispersed in different directions.

Burgundy looked to his right, peering down a corridor. Seeing that it was empty, he decided to go that way. The building that they were in seemed to be a regular office structure, with open spaces with a multitude of office booths as well as more private ones accessed through doors in corridors such as the one that he was now walking through.

He hefted his pistol, a model based on the very popular and effective M6D and its successors. Emerging on the other side of the corridor into a rather open space, with glass windows in front and to the right, he surveyed the room for all possible threats. It was as empty as its pristine light gray floor. There was a set of steps to the left, which he walked down, throwing one last look backwards to ensure that he was not being followed.

Arriving down at the end of the staircase, into what looked like some sort of reception. Burgundy froze up as he heard a sound. Listening closer, he noticed that someone was yawning. Footsteps echoed throughout the structure, giving an ominous tinge to the otherwise very comfortable reception area with its flowers and trees, pristine floor, and open space. Light from outside seeped in through windows mounted up on the walls, out of reach for any average human.

Seeing a red dot appear on his motion sensor in conjunction with the footsteps, and the lift in the reception being closed, Burgundy activated the inbuilt cloaking system and began walking towards the origin of the sound, down a corridor to the side of the reception. Suddenly, there came a voice.

"Why do I always get the boring jobs?", it said.

Burgundy continued walking towards where the sound came from, eventually turning a corner to see a man standing with his back turned to him. The man was a UNSC marine, equipped with the standard issue assault rifle and pistol.

"It's always, 'go do this, Charlie', or 'go guard this useless thing, Charlie'", the man continued. "Man, I swear"-

His rant was interrupted when he found himself unable to gather sufficient air to say anything, courtesy of being stabbed in the back by a knife. Pulling out the knife, Burgundy let the limp body of the man slide down to the floor. Gingerly, he stepped around the corpse and continued onwards down the corridor, eventually coming up to a set of steps which led all the way down to the ground level.

Arriving down on the ground floor, Burgundy walked down a large open metallic hall. He stopped just before turning left and around a corner when he heard voices. His motion tracker showed several red dots in the space around the corner. He activated the squad intercom.

"Squad, what's your status?", he said.

"This is Ray. I'm on the ground floor, behind a corner", answered a voice. "Damn UNSC thugs at the reception"

"This is Mikhail. I'm in the lift right behind the reception desk", said another voice.

"Amaia here, up on some makeshift walkway. Those dumb grunts don't even know I'm here", said yet another voice.

"MÃ©i and Xavier here, just outside the entrance door".

"Right, with that positioning, those marines shouldn't be much problem", said Burgundy. "MÃ©i and Xavier will attack first, drawing their attention. Then me and Ray go in. Amaia starts taking them out from above, and Mikhail comes in after that. Everybody got that?". There were affirmatives from his whole squad. "Good. MÃ©i, Xavier: prepare to move in on my mark".

* * *

><p>29th July 2700

Location: Classified ONI headquarters

York was sitting on one side of a conference table, with his helmet beside him. The room was well-lit, and had a few decorative plants. Its walls were painted a light gray colour, and it had no windows at all. The other figures at the table was Sir George Dewight, Agent Wyoming, Agent Texas, and Agent Carolina.

"So, you assume that TIN plans to do something with this Shepard", said Dewight.

"Yes, there were a lot of searches and info on Shepard, and I wouldn't be surprised if TIN did have plans for her", said York.

"Either that, or they simply want to mislead us", said Wyoming, twirling his moustache as he did so.

"It still bears consideration", said Dewight. "Tell me, what could Shepard have that TIN would want?"

"The Cipher", said York. "And the knowledge from the Beacons. I would think those would be quite valuable".

"Right, the Reapers", said Dewight, sighing. "How are they a threat to us, now again?"

"We don't know much about them or their plans", said Wyoming. "But they are probably a variable that must be accounted for"

"Hmm, alright", said Dewight, nodding. He sat still, contemplating what to do, before saying, "I will look into maybe reassigning someone to keep an eye on her, but with this war going on...I am unsure if we have the resources to spare, especially in light of Austrian success on the eastern front".

It had been a recent happening, but still important one, especially since one Freelancer had lost his life there during the Battle for Harvest. The Harvest native, Agent Delaware. The UNSC commander in charge of the Harvest Sector and the operations there was Admiral RodrÃ-guez, who had been caught totally off-guard by what was reportedly a massive and overwhelming offensive by the Austrians which had forced him to fall back, though not without a fight. Still, the fact that the Harvest Sector was lost was a reality, cutting off UNSC contact with the Confederation of Species.

"Latest reports place Shepard as being in Austrian territory", said Agent Texas. "I don't know how you think we're going to get anybody over there, York".

"Oh it'll be easy, just wait for Shepard's inevitable excursions into the Terminus", said York, leaning back into the chair that he was occupying. "Or Citadel Space. I doubt she'll be able to find much on the Reapers in Austria".

"Reapers, Reapers", said Texas, shaking her head. "You've been talking about those a lot since you left the Reach".

"Hey, they're dangerous", said York. "You can't blame me for being concerned".

Dewight stood up, abruptly cutting off the conversation. "The Reapers are a minor concern right now, and you are all needed for the war. As said before, I shall attempt to put some resources towards that, but with this war going on I see it quite unlikely. Now, if you'll excuse me".

Dewight walked around the conference table and exited the room through its sole door. As soon as the door shut and Dewight was far enough away, York said. "Man, I kinda miss the Director now. At least he didn't think we should be involved in front-line combat. I mean, that's the Spartan's job".

End
file.